

13 December 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I was a part time lecturer for almost a decade at the University of Toronto. Many happy moments in my chequered 'working life' were spent behind an old-fashioned lectern, in front of a huge blackboard, in a classroom where I'd once been a student. It was all talk and chalk. I loved it.

I lectured in philosophy and in various 'theories of ethics'. These topics take you just about as far as you can get from the 'how to' branches on the grand tree of knowledge. The fruit of 'how to' subjects is a mastery of 'technique' and 'method'. Our capitalist economy prizes this.

### **Labours of Love at a Lectern**

Nonetheless, my non-utilitarian subjects excited me, though I knew they made me into a quietly pitiable weirdo. My subjects did not teach you to do anything but think, and to say well what you thought. No wonder the pay was a pittance.

Stuck for conversation, I've sometimes asked people, "Did you have many good and memorable teachers in your school days?" They could always name at least one. I can name several.

They weren't always the 'coolest' teachers, nor the smartest. Often, they were the 'hard teachers', the most feared and demanding ones. Only in retrospect do we realise how good they were, and how lucky we were to have been taught by them. For 'great' teachers communicate two things: enthusiasm for their subject and excitement in passing it on.

A good teacher never forgets what it's like *not to know* what they know. The key to wisdom lies right here. Good teachers expound what they know with the same freshness they'd have had if they were only just discovering these things in the presence of their pupils.

I've come to think this ability matters much, much more than the acquisition of the latest 'technique' and 'method'. It's also the only posture in which teachers themselves can cultivate new knowledge and make fresh discoveries.

The subjects I was charged to teach excited me, yes, but so did the task of making them 'real' and comprehensible. I'm certain those years behind a lectern

made me a better thinker, more astute at questioning things, and more skilled at imagining them, than I otherwise would have been. The tired adage that says, “the best way to learn something is to teach it,” turns out to be true after all.

The Presbyterian Church, more than any other branch of the Church, has prized this capacity in its Ministers. If we esteemed them in the past, it was not as sacerdotal hierophants, nor as professional ‘nice guys’, nor as ecclesiastical entrepreneurs, but simply as *teachers*, the way Synagogues revere Rabbis.

I absorbed this from the eccentric Ministers I knew in my childhood rather in the way I acquired a Canadian accent. I couldn’t *not*.

Such teaching ought to matter. Ideas, however abstract, can change our lives. They *have* changed our lives, though we may not know it! They’re just that ‘useful’ – and that dangerous too. But when they’re dressed in beautiful language, ideas are at their most wonderful. Newton invented the ‘language’ of Calculus to clothe his new knowledge of the workings of the universe. John Donne adorned his knowledge of the human condition in the words and metre of striking poetry.

So, when someone disparages someone else for loving their subject, for learning and thinking and wanting to share it, however useless they think it is, I want to ask them, “What are you afraid of? Why does this threaten you?”

I tried, but I never could secure a full-time teaching position. Eventually, the curriculum was ‘updated’ in the direction of practical, outcome-based, subjects. My subjects were no longer wanted. I was, in ‘human resources-speak’, “invited to explore new opportunities elsewhere.”

### **“Every Knee Shall Bow”**

My years in the lecture room were not all that long ago, really. But looking back, I can see that, not only my subjects, but my techniques of teaching would now be deemed old-fashioned and ineffective. The change has been swift, and I am a dinosaur.

An article written by the kind of University teacher I had once aspired to be described what it’s like to enter the classroom these days. There is no lectern, no blackboard, no chalk dust. “The first thing I see is every head bowed before a glowing screen,” he wrote.

“Then why don’t they just stay home and interact with the screen?” I asked myself. Then I remembered. Thanks to Covid, that’s exactly what students are having to do anyway. And budget-slashing administrators, I predict, will

'earn' their big bonuses when they find a way to make this permanent. Not because it provides 'better teaching' (though propagandists will say it does), but because, by cutting out something of immeasurable value, it improves the 'bottom line'. Isn't this why 'administration costs' inflate in every region of society, while services shrink?

But it's that phrase, "every head bowed before a glowing screen," that stays with me. What better picture of our times? For we 'bow' to pray. We 'kneel' before things we revere.

Mind you, modern people have been heard to brag, and jut out their chin, and say, "I have a problem with bowing and kneeling. That's for religious freaks, not for me." We're loathe to bow – *consciously*, at least. We're too enlightened, too autonomous for any of that. We vow to kneel before nothing and no one.

If this is how we think of ourselves – and we do – any religion that asks us to bow and kneel, before one who is greater than *we* are, will have a hard time of it, won't it? Who would go to Church in *order* to bow and kneel before one who is greater than we are? We are more likely to go (as Robertson Davies said of his Presbyterian childhood) for an odd combination of 'lecture and concert'.

And yet, we must and shall bow and kneel, even (perhaps especially) *unconsciously*, unaware of our own reverence, when we "know not what we do." Isn't that more reckless than bowing before God?

Asking ourselves what we should revere, and what we should not revere, is one of life's deepest, greatest questions. Why does no one ask it anymore? Universities neither teach nor study this central feature of human life and culture, except historically and anthropologically, perhaps.

But I think the desire to kneel, to bow, and to revere – in a word, 'to worship' – is rooted deeply in the heart of our human nature.

Etty Hillesum, when she was a young Jewish woman in Amsterdam, discovered this all on her own. She was a 'non-observant Jew' and steeped in secularism, but the Nazis didn't care about any of that. They arrested her anyway and she died at Auschwitz.

She kept a diary in the last years of her life. In it, she explored her inner life and its longings. One morning, she sat down and wrote this:

"A desire to kneel sometimes pulses through my body, or rather, it is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply bowed, hands before my face."

To share in this feeling is to be in touch with our most central desire and need. "Everything in you must bow down," said the poet, Christian Wiman.

No wonder we're unhappy, we moderns. The nagging need for the religion we reject still haunts us. I think it always will. We've squelched our deepest desire, and displaced it onto lesser idols. Our modern sense of autonomy and self-containment muffles it. It's the desire to offer the inmost gift of ourselves to one who will receive and cherish us.

I suspect this desire reaches even beyond our human world. In his memoir – and with all the imagination of an accomplished storyteller spinning a fanciful fable – Timothy Findley recalls visiting his dogs before dawn in their outdoor kennel. He bedded down with them. At the very moment the sun rays peeped over the horizon, the dogs rose, turned to the east, and bowed.

The feeling even leaked into that grumpy agnostic, Thomas Hardy, a wonderful poet and novelist. Do you know his poem, "The Oxen"? It draws on the legend that, at midnight on Christmas Eve, animals everywhere kneel in reverence for a moment, as though before the Christ Child. Here are the final stanzas.

So fair a fancy few would weave  
 In these years! Yet, I feel,  
 If someone said on Christmas Eve,  
 "Come, see the oxen kneel

"In the lowly barton by yonder coomb  
 Our childhood used to know,"  
 I should go with him in the gloom,  
 Hoping it might be so.

I think, from the days of his childhood, Jesus grew to be a very good teacher. He never forgot how hard it is to be human, and what it's like not yet to know what we must know.

Teachers, of course, are 'educators'. And to educate is 'to educe', to draw out what is hidden from within. Our Lord is an excellent teacher in this sense too. When we bow before him, he puts us in touch with our deepest desire. He draws it out, and blesses it.

**Other News**

Next month, Maysie Reid will turn 103 years old. She was born in the midst of the last pandemic! But her long life may soon be drawing to a close. She's receiving palliative care now. She's comfortable and at peace. We remember her in our prayers.

You'll have noticed in the news that our fair city has been granted the not-to-be-coveted 'red zone' status, as far as Covid is concerned. This 'second wave' (or is it a third?) has brought new restrictions. The Session will review them early in the coming week. It may, sadly, be necessary for us to close our doors again. Stay tuned.

Yours in the faith,  
Andrew